

Act Three: The Covenant

I. INTRODUCTION

The Storyline

The biblical story begins by introducing the setting, main characters, and initial plot. In the first act of the biblical narrative, the reader learns that...

Through the act of creation, God establishes his kingdom over all things and appoints human beings to rule on his behalf as his image bearers, to fill the earth and develop his creation into a glorious civilization.

Like most every other story, the biblical narrative quickly runs into the conflict that needs to be overcome. The introduction of this conflict makes up the second act of the biblical story.

Tragically, human beings rebel against God as they seek to rule God's creation their own way, resulting in the curse of evil and death upon the world, which infects every aspect of God's good creation.

As the conflict of any story creates more tension, a path is laid out that sets the plot up to reach its climax. Act three of the biblical narrative does exactly this.

God remains committed to his creation by initiating a covenant with Israel to undo the world's curse by being a blessing to all nations thereby reestablishing his kingdom, but Israel is continually unfaithful to the covenant.

The Place of Act Two in the Bible

The working out of the covenant God makes with Abraham and his descendants, those who become the nation of Israel, takes center stage in the third act of the biblical story. In terms of biblical material, this is clearly the longest act, spanning from Genesis 12 to the end of the Old Testament. But of the thirty-nine books that make up the Old Testament, only eleven actually trace the primary storyline; the remaining books fit somewhere within this eleven-book outline (see below).

The Old Testament books in chronological order

the books in **bold** trace the primary storyline

Genesis	1 Samuel	2 Kings	Habakkuk
Job	2 Samuel	2 Chronicles	Lamentations
Exodus	1 Chronicles	Obadiah	Daniel
Leviticus	Psalms	Joel	Ezekiel
Numbers	1 Kings	Jonah	Ezra
Deuteronomy	Song of Songs	Amos	Haggai
Joshua	Proverbs	Hosea	Zechariah
Judges	Ecclesiastes	Isaiah	Esther
Ruth		Micah	Nehemiah
		Nahum	Malachi
		Zephaniah	
		Jeremiah	

II. ACT THREE: THE COVENANT

The Covenant: A Promise for the World

The Covenant's People. In the shadow of the Tower of Babel, God makes a spectacular promise to one particular man, Abram (Gen 12:2–3).

*I will make you a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
so that you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and the one who curses you I will curse,
and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

The Covenant's Purpose. The final line of this promise is significant: Abram and his descendants are chosen by God to reverse the curse. Through their faithful obedience to God's covenant, blessings were to flow not only to the nation of Israel, but also through them to the entire world. God's kingdom would finally come to earth for all to enjoy through Israel's faithfulness.

*"Abraham and his descendants
are somehow to be the means
of God putting things to right,
the spearhead of God's rescue operation."*

N. T. Wright
Simply Christian

Abraham and his descendants inherit the role of Adam and Eve: Israel is to become God's true humanity. Commands first given to Adam are passed on and reiterated to Abraham and his offspring (Gen 17:1–8; 22:15–18; 26:1–6; 28:3–5; 35:11–12).

The Covenant's Problem. The remainder of act three is haunted by the fact that Israel, the bearers of God's solution, is also part of the problem. They continually fail to be the people God calls them to be, so God repeatedly acts from within Israel to move the narrative toward the hope of restoration.

Repeating the Theme: Exile and Return

Exile and Return (OT). One particular theme seems to repeat itself through the story of Israel: exile and return. Each movement within act three begins with Israel in a difficult situation, usually as a result of their sin. Israel cries out to God, and then God rescues them, as the hope of the renewed kingdom presents itself seemingly over the horizon. Inevitably, however, the cycle repeats itself time and time again.

From Slavery to Freedom (Exodus). God's covenant with Abraham passes to his son Isaac and then to his son Jacob, whose name is changed to Israel and whose twelve sons become the twelve tribes. Four hundred years after Abraham, his descendants

find themselves in captivity in Egypt. God works miraculously through Moses to deliver his people from slavery. In the wilderness, God reestablishes his covenant with the entire nature, gives them his law, and reminds them that they are to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priests for the world (Exodus 19—20).

From Wandering to Conquering (Numbers, Joshua). As Israel prepares to enter the Promised Land, the new Garden of Eden, they rebel against God by refusing to trust him to take the land. So God leaves them to wander the wilderness for forty years before a new generation, under the leadership of Joshua, is allowed to enter.

From Oppression to Monarchy (Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel). After Israel conquers the land, the twelve tribes repeatedly struggle to secure it due to their constant rebellion against God. Periodically, God uses judges to bring small, temporary victories for each tribe, but ultimately the twelve tribes live oppressed by their enemies. Eventually, God establishes the monarchy of Israel under king Saul, then David, and then Solomon, promising to establish through David's heirs an everlasting and worldwide kingdom (2 Samuel 7:18–29).

From Division to Prophets (1 and 2 Kings). The united monarchy of Israel is short-lived. After Solomon dies, the kingdom divides into the northern part called Israel and the southern part called Judah. Most of the people, especially the kings, constantly fail to live up to God's covenant. In response, God sends various prophets to call his people back to covenant faithfulness, threatening judgment for disobedience and the restoration of his kingdom for obedience.

From Exile to Rebuilding (Ezra, Nehemiah). Israel's and Judah's unwillingness to be faithful to God's covenant, despite numerous warnings from the prophets, leads to destruction and ultimately exile in a foreign land. First the Assyrians conquer Israel, and then later the Babylonians conquer Judah, destroying Jerusalem and the Temple. For seventy years the Jews live in exile until they are allowed to return to the land and rebuild.

Waiting: The Hope of Israel

Slaves at Home. Though the Old Testament ends with various efforts to rebuild, it is not the glorious return the Jews expected. Even the new Temple pales in comparison to the former, with no sign of God's *shekinah* glory ever filling the Holy of Holies. While some of the Jews are back in their own land, they still remained enslaved to foreign powers—first to Persia, then to Egypt, Greece, Syria, and finally Rome. For over four hundred years between the Testaments, the Jews remain in exile waiting to see if God would one day accomplish what he promised.

The Promise of the Kingdom. Even during the darkest hours of the Old Testament, God still promises restoration. Israel's enemies will be condemned, and the one who will judge them will be a strange, human figure, "one like a son of man" (Daniel 7:13–14). This will be the coming of God's kingdom over the world, when things on earth will finally be made right, and God's covenant with Abraham is finally fulfilled.

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STORY

The Mission of God

Despite humanity's rebellion, God's covenant with Abraham reveals God's mission: he is intent on restoring all that's gone wrong with the world. God is working to reestablish his reign over all creation. His original design for humanity to rule and develop this earth is not set aside; it is renewed in his covenant with Abraham. The mission of God is what carries the story of the Bible from Genesis 12 to Revelation 22.

The Means of God's Mission

To accomplish his mission for the world, God chooses to work through a particular people, which is what "election" is all about. The election of Israel was never for Israel's sake alone, but for the sake of the entire world. This means that God's desire is to partner with his people, to work from within creation itself, to reclaim all of creation and all nations within it.

God's Faithfulness to Covenant

Israel's constant inability to live up to the conditions of the covenant sharply reveals that they, though chosen to be God's solution to restore this broken world, are still a part of the problem and in need of healing themselves. Yet despite Israel's repeated unfaithfulness, God still promises to restore his creation through them. The question, then, that presses upon the dawn of the New Testament, is this: how will God remain faithful to his covenant in the face of Israel's unfaithfulness?

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Despite humanity's rebellion against God and the disastrous results upon his creation that follow, God chooses to begin fixing things by blessing one man and his family. The descendants of this family, the nation of Israel, form a covenant with God to be his people and the means to reestablish his kingdom on earth. Yet time and time again, Israel fails on both counts. Judgment and deliverance become a repeated cycle that leads only to the promise that God will one day intervene himself in faithfulness to the covenant. Somehow he will deliver Israel from their enemies and finally establish his reign over all the earth once and for all.